

THE OLD DRAMA IN HONOLULU

By CHARLES WARREN STODDARD.

The Theater Which Once Stood on the Site of the Masonic Temple--Players and the Manager, Afterwards a Leper.

It is from the seaward window of the United States Legation in Honolulu that I have of late cast a pathetic eye. The "tear of sympathy" may not flow as freely in recent literature as was its custom in the age of more reverent readers and writers; but there is something in the forlorn beauty of the wilderness over against the Legation that conjures the obsolete globe above referred to, and I shed it fearlessly and not without reason.

Upon the diagonal corner of the street stands the new hall of the Young Men's Christian Association, smelling of bricks and mortar; over the way is a tenement where plain board and lodging entice the stranger under a disguise of fresh paint—these are both innovations necessary no doubt, to the requirements of a progressive age; but the occasion of my present solicitude is a vacant corner lot, trimly fenced, wherein two rows of once stately palms now struggle with decay and the parasites that fatten on them.

It is a weird garden, where Flora and Thesps once held friendly rivalry. What a jumble of botanical debris and histrionic rubbish now litters the area flanked by forlorn palms! Out of it all I doubt if the sentimental scavenger would be able to pick any relic more substantial than the airy dagger of Macbeth; but upon points so slight as this hang imperishable memories; hence follow these reminiscences of the late Royal Hawaiian Theater.

Well nigh two score of years ago I was lounging at Whitney's bookstore in Honolulu; it was at that time a kind of Hawaiian Forum, with a post-office on one side of the room and a semaphore on the roof. It was dull work in those days, waiting for the guant arms of the semaphore to swing about, uttering its cabalistical prophecies. No steamers then to stain the brilliant sky with trailing smoke; the maildays depended entirely upon the state of the wind and the tide.

I was weary of fumbling the shopworn books, of listening or trying not to listen to the roar of the rollers on the reef; woefully weary of the tepid monotony that offered not even an excuse for irritation.

Upon this mood entered a slender but well-proportioned gentleman, clad in white duck raiment, spotless and well starched; there was something about him which would have caused the casual observer to give him a second glance—a mannerism and an air that distinguished him. A professional, probably, thought I; an eccentric, undoubtedly. I was not surprised when, upon the entrance of a common friend a few moments later, I was made acquainted with Mr. Proteus, proprietor and manager of the Royal Hawaiian Theater; likewise government botanist and professor of many branches of art both sacred and profane. Mr. Proteus bowed somewhat in the manner of a French dancing-master, and shuddered slightly upon being shaken by the hand; at a later date he requested me never to repeat a formality which he could not but consider quite unnecessary in general and in particular cases highly objectionable.

After having cautiously exchanged a few languid commonplaces, Mr. Proteus invited me to visit his Temple of the Muses. Nothing could have pleased me better. I regarded him as a godsend, and we at once repaired to the theater, threading the blazing streets together under a huge green-lined umbrella of dazzling whiteness, held jauntily by my new-found friend.

I like theaters; I note on dingy tinseled and stuccoed in a flash of light in transformed into brilliant beauty; and the odor, the unmistakable odor of stale foot lights and thick coats of distemper; the suggestive confusion of flats and wings and flies; the picturesque bric-a-brac of the property-room; the trap-doors, the slides, the grooves, the stuffy dressing-rooms, and the stray play-bills pasted here and there in memory of gala nights in the past. Of all the theaters that I have known, this was the most theatrical, because the most unreal; it was like a make-believe theater, wherein everything was done for the fun of it: a kind of child's toy theater grown up, and full of grown-up players, who, by an enchantment which was the sole right of this house, became like children the moment they set foot upon that stage; and there people and players were as happy and careless as children should be so long

as one stone of that play-house stood upon another.

We turned into Alakea Street a pastoral lane in those days; the grass was parted down the middle of it by a trail and dust; strange trees waved blossoming branches over us. I looked up: in the midst of a beautiful garden stood a quaint, old-fashioned building; but for its surroundings I might easily have mistaken it for a primitive, puritanical, New England village meeting-house; long windows, of the kind that slide down into a third of their natural height, were opened to the breeze; great dragon-flies sailed in and out at leisure.

The theater fronted upon a street more traveled and more pretentious than the one we entered, and from the street a flight of steps led to a door which might be opened into the choir-loft if this had really been a meeting-house; but as it was nothing of the sort, the door at the top of the stairs admitted you without a moment's notice to the dress circle; bees and butterflies lounged about it; every winged thing had the entree of this delightful establishment.

With Proteus I approached the stage-door; tufts of long grass trailed over the three broad wooden steps that led to the mysterious portal; luxuriant creepers festooned the casement; small lizards, shining with metallic luster, slid into convenient crevices as we drew near. A faint delicious fragrance was wafted from the garden, where a native lad with spouting hose in hand was showering a broad-leaved plant, upon which the falling water boomed like a drum; it was the only sound that broke the soothing silence.

Proteus produced a key, and with a flourish applied it to the lock; the door swung in upon the stage—no dingy and irregular passage intervened—the cozy stage flooded with sunshine, from which the mimic scenes had been swept back against the wall, and the space filled to the proscenium with trapeze, rings, bars, and springboards; in brief, the theater had been transformed into a symposium between two dramatic seasons.

The body of the house was in its normal condition—the pit filled with rude benches; a piano stood under the foot-lights—it usually comprised the orchestra; thin partitions, about shoulder high, separated the two ends of the dressing circle, and the spaces were known as boxes. A half-dozen real kings and queens had witnessed the lives and deaths of player-kings and queens from these queer little cubby-holes.

Folding doors thrown wide open in the rear of the stage admitted us to the green-room—a pretty parlor well furnished with bachelor comforts. The large center-table was covered with a rich Turkish tapestry; on it stood an antique astral lamp with a depressed globe and a tall, slender stem; hand-gilded mirrors, resting upon carved and gilded consoles, extended to the ceiling; statuettes and vases were placed before them; lounges, Chinese reclining-chairs and ottomans encumbered the floor; a valuable oil-painting, which had a look of age, hung over the piano; on the latter stood two deep, bell-shaped globes of glass that protected wax tapers from the tropical drafts; a double window, which was ever open to the trade-wind was thickly screened by vines. On one side of this exceptional green-room—it was in reality the boudoir of the erratic Proteus—was a curtained arch, and within it the sleeping apartment of him who had for years made the theater his home. On the other side of the room was a bath supplied with a flowing stream of fresh, cool mountain water; these compartments were in their turn the dressing rooms of leading man and lady. Beneath the stage were all the kitchen wares that heart or stomach could desire. And thus was the drama nourished in Dreamland before the antipodes had lost their savior.

Proteus was an extremist in all things, capable of likes and dislikes as violent as they were sudden and unaccountable; we became fast friends at once, and it was my custom to lounge under the window in the green-room hour after hour, while he talked of the vicissitudes in his extraordinary career, or related episodes in the dramatic history of his house—a history which dated back to 1848; some of these were romantic, some humorous or grotesque, but all were alike of interest to me.

Honolulu has long been visited by

musical and dramatic celebrities, for they are of a nomadic tribe. As early as 1850, Steve Massett—"Jeems Pipes of Pipeville"—was concertizing here, and again in 1878, in 1885 Kate Hayes gave concerts at three dollars per ticket; Lola Montez and Madame Ristori have visited this capital, but not professionally. In 1882 Edwin Booth played in that very theater, and for a time lived in it, after the manner of Proteus; among those who have followed him Mrs. Charles Mathews, Herr Bandmann, Walter Montgomery, Madame Marie Duret, Signor and Signora Bianchi, Signor Orlandini, Madame Agatha States, Madame Eliza Biscacianti, Madame Josephine d'Ormy, J. C. Williamson and Maggie Moore, Professor Anderson, "The Wizard of the

but a midsummer night's dream. "And was it nothing to see a whole pit full of Kanakas, black, brown, and white-brown, till lately cannibals, showing their teeth, and enjoying 'Patter versus Clatter' as much as a few years ago they would have enjoyed the roasting of a missionary or the baking of a baby?"

"It was certainly a page in one's life never to be forgotten." Let me add that Mr. Mathews is more amusing than authentic; cannibalism is unknown in the annals of the Hawaiian kingdom; if there has been any human roasting done in this domain, it has been done since the arrival of the American missionaries.

That little play-house was in its day thronged by audiences attracted

sion. Could anything be jollier? Sweetmeats and semi-solitude, and the Kanaka with his sprinkler to turn on a tropical shower at the shortest notice. This youth was a shining example of the ingenuity of his race; he had orders to water the plants at certain hours daily; and one day we found him in the garden under an umbrella, playing the hose in opposition to a heavy rain-storm. His fidelity established him permanently in his master's favor.

Many strange characters found shelter under that roof: Thespian waifs thrown upon the mosquito shore, who, perhaps, rested for a time, and then set sail again; prodigal circus boys, disabled and useless, deserted by their fellows, here bided their

ment—it looked like an aboriginal melodeon, the legs of which were so feeble that the body of it was lashed with hempen cord to rings screwed into the floor—she sang, out of a heart that seemed utterly broken, a song that was like the cry of a lost soul.

Tears jetted from her eyes and splashed upon her ample bosom; the instrument quaked under her vigorous pumping of the pedals; it was a question whether to laugh or to weep—a hysterical moment—but the case she speedily settled by burying her face in her apron and trumpeting sonorously; upon which, bursting into a hilarious ditty, she reiterated with hoarse "ha, ha's," that ended in shrieks of merriment, "We'll laugh the blues away!" and we did.

This extraordinary woman, whose voice, in spite of years of dissipation, had even to the end a charm of its own, came to her death in San Francisco at the hands of a brute who was living upon the wages she drew from playing the piano in an underground beer hall.

Then there was Madame Marie Duret, who, having outlived the popularity of her once famous "Jack Sheppard," would doubtless have ended her days in Dreamland chaperoning the amateurs, and probably braving the footlights herself at intervals, for she was well preserved. But alas! there was a flaw in the amenities, and she fled to worse luck. She went to California, fighting poverty and paralysis with an energy and good nature for which she was scarcely rewarded. A mere handful of friends, and most of those recent ones, saw her decently interred.

And mad, marvelous Walter Montgomery, with his sensational suicide in the first quarter of a honeymoon. He used to ride a prancing horse in Honolulu, a horse that was a whole circus in itself, and scatter handfuls of small coin to and fro just for the fun of seeing the little natives scramble for it.

And Madame Biscacianti—poor soul! the thorn was never from the breast of that nightingale. After the bitterest sorrows mingled with the brilliantest triumphs, did she, I wonder find comfortable obscurity in Italy as a compensation for all her sufferings? At last she sleeps in her unvisited grave. Sleep well, old friend!

Proteus himself had, perhaps, the most uncommon history of all. This he related one evening when we were in the happiest mood; there was a panorama dragging its slow length along before an audience attracted, no doubt, as much by the promise of numerous and costly gifts of a sum-total for out stripping the receipts of the house, as by the highly colored pictorial progress of Banyan's famous Pilgrim. We had been lounging in the royal box, and, growing weary of the entertainment, especially weary of a barrel-organ that played at the heels of Christian through all his tribulation; we repaired to the green-room, and somehow fell to talking of individual progress, and of the pack we each must carry through storm and shine. Proteus evidently began his story without premeditation; it was not a flowing narrative; there were spurts of revelation interrupted at intervals by the strains of the barrel-organ, from which there was no escape. Later, I was able to follow the thread of it, joining it here and there, for he himself had become interested and he had frequent recourse to a diary which he had stenographed after his own fashion, and the key of which no one but himself possessed.

He was of New England parentage, born in 1826; as a youth was delicate and effeminate; was gifted with many accomplishments; sketched well, sang well, played upon several instruments, and was, withal, an uncommon linguist. He was a great lover of nature. His knowledge was varied and very accurate; he was an authority upon most subjects which interested him at all; was a botanist of repute had a smattering of many sciences, and was correct as far as he went in all of them.

He lost his father in infancy, and his training was left to tutors; he was a highly imaginative dreamer, and romantic in the extreme; for this reason, and having never known a father's will, he left home in his youth, and was for some years a wanderer,

seeking, it was thought an elder brother, who had long since disappeared. He was in California in early days; in Hawaii, Australia, and Tahiti; the love of adventure grew upon him; he learned to adapt himself to circumstances. Though not handsome he was well proportioned and possessed of much physical grace. He traveled for a time with a circus; learned to balance himself on a globe, to throw double-somersaults, and to do daring trapeze flights in the peak of the tent. Growing weary of this, and having already known and become enamored of Hawaii, he returned to the islands, secured the Royal Hawaiian Theater and began life anew. His collection of botanical plants surrounding the theater was exceptionally rich and a source of profit to him; but the theater was his hobby, and he rode it to the last.

Nothing seemed quite impossible to him upon the stage; anything from light comedy to eccentric character parts was in his line; the prima donna in burlesque opera was a favorite assumption; nor did he, out of the love of his art, disdain to dance the wench-dance in a minstrel show; he had even a circus of his own; but his off hours were employed in his garden or with pupils whom he instructed in music, dancing, fencing, boxing, gymnastics and I know not what else.

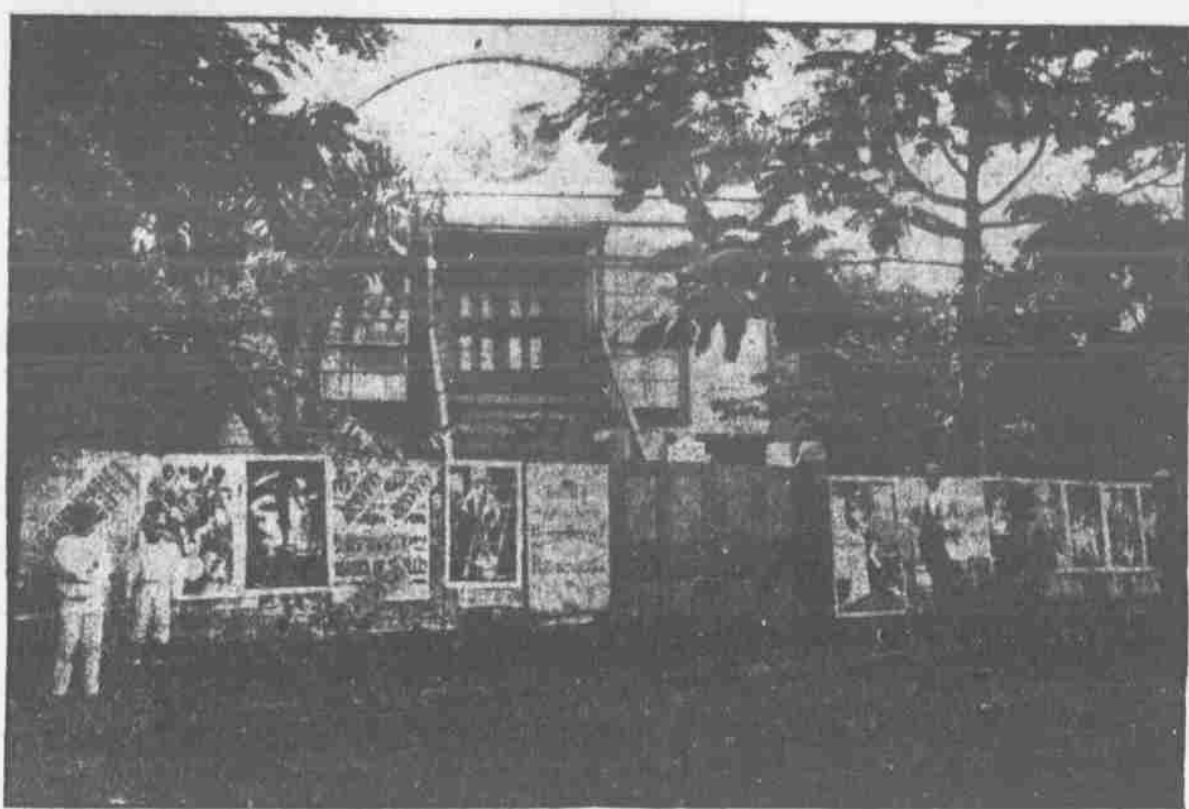
On one occasion he took with him to California a troupe of Hawaii's hula-hula dancers the only ones who have gone abroad professionally, and his experiences with these people, whose language he had made his own, and with whom he was in full sympathy, would fill a volume. Their singular superstitions; the sacrifices of pig and fowl which he had at times to permit them to make in order to appease wrathful gods; the gypsy life they led in the interior of the State, where, apart from the settlements, they would camp by a stream in some canon and live for a little while the life of their beloved islands; the insults they received in the up-country towns from the civilized whites, who like wild beasts fell upon them, and finally succeeded in demoralizing and disbanding the troupe—these episodes he was fond of enlarging upon, and his fascinating narrative was enlivened with much highly original and humorous detail.

Through all his vicissitudes he preserved a refinement which was remarked by every one who knew him. He was an intimate of the Kings Lunailoa I., and Kalakaua I., and of many Hawaiians of rank; he had danced in the royal set at court-balls; was a member and correspondent of several scientific societies; a man of the most eccentric description; greatly loved by a few, intensely disliked by many, and perhaps fully understood by no one. He had learned to hate the world, and at times to irritate himself very much over it; doubtless he had cause.

My last night in the little theater was the pleasantest of all. The play was over; during its action great ruby-eyed moths with scarlet spots like blood-drops on their wings flew through the windows and dove headlong into the foot-lights, where they suffered martyrdom, and eventually died to slow music; and then the rain came and beat upon that house, and it leaked; but umbrellas were not prohibited; the shower was soon over; we shook our locks like spaniels, and laughed again; and it was all very tropical.

Late in the night Proteus and I were supping in the green-room, when he told me in a stage whisper how night after night, when the place was as black as a tomb, he had heard a light footfall, a softly creaking floor, and a mysterious movement of the furniture; how twice the dark figure stood by his bedside with fixed eyes, like the ghost of Banquo; there was enough moonlight in the room to reveal the outline of this figure, and to shine dimly through it as through folds of crape. And often there were voices whispering audibly, and it was as if the disembodied had returned to play their parts again before a spectral audience come from the graves of the past; and he was sure to stand at intervals, above the ghostly ranting, the soft patter of applause—"Like that," said Proteus, starting from his chair, as a puff of wind extinguished the lamp and left us in awful darkness. We listened, I heard

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THE THEATER IN OLD HONOLULU STANDING WHERE THE MASONIC TEMPLE IS NOW LOCATED. HOTEL AND ALAKEA STREETS.

North," Madame Anna Bishop in 1857 and 1868, Ilma di Murska, the Carrandis, the Zavistowski, Charlie Backus, Joe Murphy, Billy Emerson, etc. As for panoramas, magicians, glass-blowers, and the like, their number and variety are confounding. The experiences of these clever people while here must have been a delight to most of them; though the professional who touches for a few hours or a few days only at this tropical oasis in the sea-desert on his way to or from Australia will hardly realize the sentimental sadness of those who have gone down into the Pacific to astonish the natives, and have found it no easy task to get over the reef again at the close of a disastrous season. The hospitality of the hospitable people is not always equal to such an emergency; but there are those who have longed for it ever since they first discovered that play-acting is not all work—in one theater, at least.

That marvelously young old man, the late Charles Mathews, who certainly had a right to be world-weary if any one has, out of the fulness of his heart wrote the following on his famous tour of the world in 1873-74: "At Honolulu, one of the loveliest little spots upon earth"—he was fresh from the gorgeous East when he wrote that—from the Indies, luminous in honor of the visit of the Prince of Wales—"I acted one night by command and in the presence of His Majesty Kamehameha V., King of the Sandwich Islands—not Hoky Poky Wanky Fam, as erroneously reported; and a memorable night it was."

"I found the theater—to use a technical expression—cramped to suffocation, which means very full; though from the state of the thermometer on this occasion, suffocation wasn't so incorrect a description as usual."

"A really elegant-looking audience; tickets ten shillings each, evening dresses, uniforms of every cut and country; chiefesses and ladies of every tinge in dresses of every color; flowers and jewels in profusion, satin play-bills, fans going, windows and doors all open, an outside staircase leading straight into the dress-circle, without check-taker or money-taker."

"Kanakas women in the garden below selling bananas and peanuts by the glare of flaming torches on a sultry, tropical moonlight night."

"The whole thing was like nothing

by very dissimilar entertainments; anything from five acts and a prologue of melo-drama to a troupe of trained poodles was sure to transform the grassy lane into a bazaar of fruit-sellers, and the box-office under the stairs into a bedlam of chattering natives. One heard almost as well outside as within the building; the high windows were down from the top, because air was precious and scarce; banana leaves fluttered like cambric curtains before them! if a familiar air was struck upon the piano in the orchestra, the Kanakas lying in the grass under the garden fence took up the refrain and hummed it softly and sweetly, the music ceased, the play began, the listeners in the street, seeing no part of the stage—little, in fact, save the lamplight streaming through the waving banana leaves—busied themselves with talk; they buzzed like swarming bees, they laughed like careless children, they echoed the applause of the spectators, and amused themselves mightily. Meanwhile, the royal family was enjoying the play in the most natural and unpretentious fashion. Perhaps it was an abbreviated version of a Shakespearian tragedy primitively played by a limited company; or it may have been the garden scene from "Romeo and Juliet," wherein Juliet leaned from a balcony embowered with palms and ferns transplanted from the garden for that night only, and making a picture of surpassing loveliness.

Everybody in that house knew everybody else; a solitary stranger would have been at once discovered and scrutinized. It was like a social gathering, where, indeed, "carriages may be ordered at 10:30;" but most of the participants walked home. Who would not have walked home through streets that are like garden paths very much exaggerated; where the melodious Kanaka seeks in vain to outsing the tireless cricket, and both of them are overcome by the lugubrious double-bass of the sea?

But to Proteus once more: When social dinners ceased to attract, when the boarding-house grew tedious and the Chinese restaurant became a burden, he repaired to the cool basement under the stage, a kind of culinary laboratory, such as amateurs in cookery delight in, and there he prepared the daintiest dishes; he and I often partook of them in Crusoe-like seclusion.

time; basking in the hot sunshine, feeding on the locusts and wild honey of idleness, they at last, falling in with some troupe of strolling athletes, have dashed again into the glittering ring with new life, a new name, and a new blaze of spangles; the sadness of many a twilight in Honolulu has been intensified by the melancholy picking of the banjo in the hands of some dejected minstrel who was coral-stranded as it were. All these conditions touched us similarly. Reclining in the restful silence of that room it was our wont to philosophize over glasses of lemonade—nothing stronger than this, for Proteus was of singularly temperate appetites; and there I learned much of those whom I knew not personally, and saw much of some whom I might elsewhere have never met.

One day he said to me: "You like music; come with me and you shall hear such as is not often heard." We passed down the pretty lane upon which the stage door opened, and approached the sea; almost upon the edge of it, and within sound of the ripples that lapped lazily the coral frontage of the esplanade, we turned into a bakery and inquired for the baker's lady. She was momentarily expected. We were shown into an upper room scantily furnished, and from a frail balcony, that looked unable to support us, we watched the coming of a portly female in a short frock, whose gait was masculine, and her tastes likewise; for she was smoking a large and handsomely colored meerschaum; a huge dog, dripping sea water at every step, walked demurely by her side. Recognizing Proteus, who stood somewhat in fear of her, for she was bulky and boisterous, she hailed him with a shout of welcome that might have been heard a block away.

This was Madame Josephine d'Ormy, whose operatic career began—in America—long ago in Castle Garden, and ended disastrously in San Francisco. Her adventures by land and sea—she was once shipwrecked—will not be dwelt on here. Enough that she laid aside her pipe, saluted Proteus with an emphasis that raised him a full foot from the floor, and learning that I was from San Francisco, she embraced me with emotion; she could not speak of that city without sobbing. Placing herself at an instru-